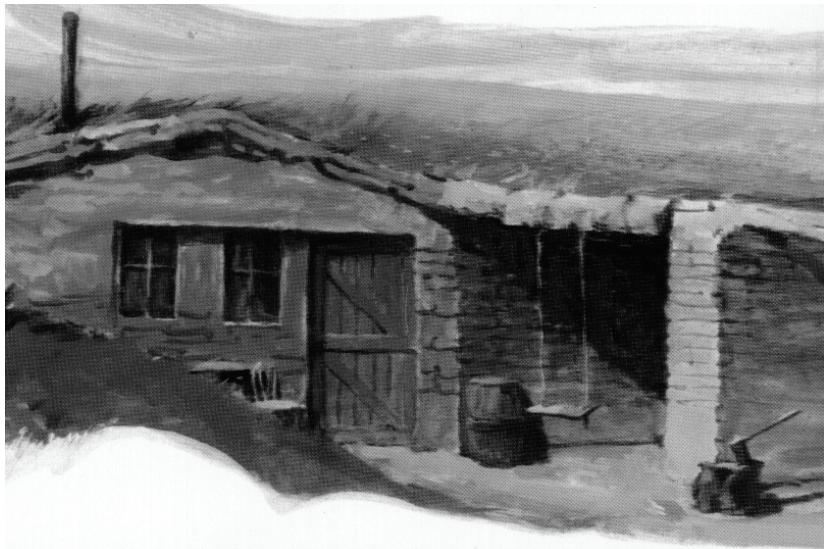


THE LEGACY



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UNIT SIX

THE LEGACY

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The following is background information for creating lesson plans. Activities start on page 102.

FREE LAND?

In 1862 when the cry went out that there were millions of acres of free land out west, people moved west to stake their claims. As many of the people who answered this call found out, the promise of the land being free fell short of the bitter truth. While the monetary expense of filing a homestead was relatively cheap, payment was very high in terms other than cash. The free land was not really free. The Homestead Act created disruptions that produced both winners and losers.

PRAIRIE

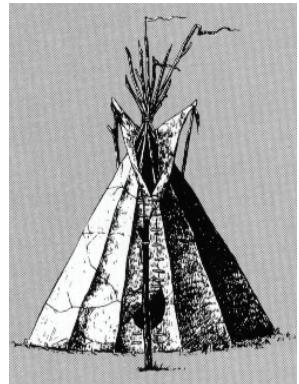


For the prairie, the results of homesteading were harsh. Land, which for a million years stayed intact as prairie, was virtually changed in a few decades. The homesteaders plowed the prairie sod to make fields to plant crops. Today only small remnants of virgin prairie exist. Some areas of tallgrass prairie have been restored with assistance from humans. For animals like the bison, the swallow-tailed kite, the Eskimo curlews, the gray wolf, and the badger the struggle for survival left them greatly decreased in number or even extinct. The onslaught of over hunting and rapid removal of the native grasslands left many animals unable to survive.

Others like the coyote, meadowlark, and white-tailed deer learned to adapt and even flourished for a while under the changes. For the prairie, there were few winners, but many losers.

AMERICAN INDIANS

With the passing of the bison and much of their traditional homelands, Plains Indians were devastated by the change in the native prairie. Their cultures revolved around intricacies of the prairie ecosystem. When that ecosystem was plowed up changes had to follow. Left with little choice but to comply with treaty demands tribes gave up their homelands and traditional way of life. The intent of the U.S. government was to make the American Indian Nations live like "white settlers." The government passed laws to prohibit the native people from practicing their traditions and beliefs. Many tribes buried their traditional ways underground and hid it from the eyes of those who would try to abolish it. Even with the demise of the grasslands the culture was able to survive in part. Few would disagree that the Plains Tribes were losers, but some of their old traditions survived.



HOMESTEADERS

To homesteaders the cost of the changing prairie was high. Many came from east of the Mississippi River and Europe to start a new life. They wanted to accomplish the dreams they each thought they deserved. The homesteaders came to a land of vast grasses that had survived for a million years. They tried to make a life for themselves and their families. Few understood or knew of the difficulties they would be forced to face. Approximately sixty percent of the people who came out west to homestead gave up and either returned "home" or moved to the towns and cities of the Midwest. In Custer County, Nebraska, during a three-week period in the 1880s, more than 8,000 people left and returned east. These people represented the many for whom the difficulties were too great.

For others there was nothing for them to go back to and everything holding them to their claim. They struggled, and with nothing better to do than stay they learned to survive. For many, their children's lives were less harsh because of the struggles of their parents. This was what many of the homesteaders came for, a better life for their children. In that sense the changes the homesteaders faced were difficult, but they believed themselves to be successful. Those who managed to stay and "tough it out" created an agricultural empire for a growing nation.

THE NATION

In one of the greatest changes ever accomplished by any nation, the United States government gave up 270 million acres of land in small tracts to its occupants. This policy was copied from no other nation's system. It was originally and distinctively American.

The population of the United States doubled in less than forty years after the enactment of the Homestead Act. During that time ten more states were added to the Union. Towns and cities developed in the West. Education was valued, and brought the sons and daughters of immigrants together with children born of United States citizens. Across the prairies and Plains agricultural colleges were established as a result of the Land Grant College Act of July 2, 1862. The combination of education, personal initiative, invention and commerce led to changes in technology and communication.

More efficient farm machines were developed, and the Homestead Act no longer fit the changing needs of farmers moving further west. Much larger tracts of land were irrigated or ranched to make them profitable. In 1904 the Kinkaid Act allowed 640 acre homesteads in designated areas. In 1976 the Homestead Act was finally repealed for all States, except Alaska, where it remained in force until 1986.

For more than a century the Homestead Act influenced the character, prosperity, and values of the nation.



Technology, efficiency, crop rotation, and soil conservation propelled one century's farmers into another century of global agricultural dominance. American farms of the Great Plains continue to supply ample food for this nation's people and millions around the world. The ethic of hard work on one's own land has left a legacy of vast economic prosperity and creative inspiration. It also left rifts and scars of misunderstanding between people of different cultures that are still felt today.

Artists, musicians, architects, and photographers have captured the drama of these conflicts and stories. The prairie and its people have contributed a unique legacy to the myriad forms of American art. It is in the novels of Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, Vine and Ella Deloria and Charles Eastman. The varieties of tone and texture are captured in the music of Woody Guthrie, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thompson, and Jack Gladstone. The prairie horizon infuses the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Daily traditions of the homesteader are defined in the quilts of Grace Snyder and the photographs of Solomon D. Butcher. Paintings by Harvey Dunn, ballets staged by Martha Graham, and stories collected by Matthew "Sitting Bear" Jones celebrate this rich legacy. It is not just the history of the past, but the continuing legacy of the Homestead Act that merits research and study.

UNIT 6, ACTIVITY 1

COST OF THE LEGACY

THEME:

The concept of "free land" was really a misnomer. For the prairie ecosystem, homesteaders, and the American Indians, there was a cost to be paid and it was often very high.

OBJECTIVE:

Students will be able to name a "cost" to each of the following: the prairie ecosystem, the homesteaders, and the American Indians.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

paper, pencil

SUBJECT: social studies**SKILLS:** brainstorming, analyzing**METHODS:** Students will learn about the high costs of

homesteading. The price paid was not always monetary. Different costs were incurred by the prairie, the people who came west to homestead, and American Indians.

1. Explain the different costs of an item to students. In other words, cost is not always something you pay money for. It can be something you have to give up in order to receive something you want. Have students suggest some costs for something they want. Example: Giving up time to watch TV instead of studying means you may not do well on a test. Or taking a trip to another part of the country might mean you can not participate in a summer camp program.
2. Divide students into groups of four. Assign each person in the group a task to do (leader, recorder, task keeper, timer).
3. In their groups, students need to determine the "costs" of the Homestead Act of 1862 and whether it had a negative or positive effect on each of the following: Prairie ecosystems, Homesteaders, American Indians.
4. Each group needs to answer the following questions: (it might help students to pretend to be each of the three groups that paid a price).
 1. What was it like for the prairie ecosystem, settlers, American Indians before the Homestead Act?
 2. What was it like after the Homestead Act took effect?
 3. What changed for the prairie, homesteaders, and American Indians?
 4. What was good and what was bad?
 5. What price did each pay for the Homestead Act in terms of what was gained and what was lost?
5. Gather together in a large group and talk about what the students discovered.

UNIT 6, ACTIVITY 2

THE HOMESTEAD PLAY

THEME:

The homesteaders came west for what they thought was free land and found that it came with a high cost not just for themselves, but for American Indians and the prairie environment. Whole ways of life changed, some for better and some for worse, but always at a high cost for all.

OBJECTIVE:

1. Students will be able to pull together everything they have learned in the different units (prairie balance, people of the prairie, homestead history, prairie life, and legacy) to create a play.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

a variety of possible items: tape recorder, background music, scripts, costumes, props, video camera if available

SUBJECT: social studies, science, art

SKILLS: groups skills, communication, understanding, comprehension, analyzing, knowledge, creativity, transposition

METHODS: Students will create a play based on what they have learned about homesteading.

1. As a group, assist students in writing a play about the Homestead Act of 1862 that includes aspects of the different units of prairie balance, people of the prairie, homestead history, prairie life, and legacy. Have students present the play to the school.

EXPLORING EXPERIENCES: Have students create a bulletin board about Homesteading and the Homestead Act of 1862. Have students learn about other lands acts such as the Pre-Emption, Kincaid, and Timber Culture Acts. How did these acts affect homesteading, the prairie ecosystem, and American Indians.